

The Institutionalisation of Amateur Esports in Denmark

New Values, New Opportunities, and New Constraints?

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Abstract

Esports is often portrayed as a rapidly expanding cultural field, yet its global development has been marked by an increasing concentration of commercial power. As publishers, media platforms, and tournament organisers consolidate control over competitive infrastructures, the space for non-professional forms of esports appears to narrow. This article critically examines the institutionalisation of organised amateur esports within DGI, Denmark's second largest sport association, through a qualitative case study using documents and interviews. The aim of the study is to understand how DGI employs institutional isomorphism dynamics and logics to legitimate esports within its associative, health oriented, and community-based values. In this regard, persistent tensions between esports' market and performance-driven logics and DGI's traditional associational ideals reveal the limits of such an adaptation. Membership uptake remains below expectations. In addition, the legal recognition of esports as a sport that serves the public interest, exemplified by the VAT exemption case, relies on strategic alignment rather than intrinsic conformity with associational norms. These findings suggest that institutional integration of a novel, digitally rooted sport may achieve formal legitimacy but, in this case, cannot fully resolve underlying conflicts between commercial global esports logics and DGI's amateur logics.

Keywords: esports, Danish sport system, DGI, institutionalisation, institutional isomorphism dynamics, institutional logics, legitimation

Historically, esports can be linked to the work of several ‘enthusiasts’ organising online ‘clan’ tournaments and LAN (Local Area Network) parties (Wagner, 2006; Witkowski, 2023). In the early 2000s, esports developed into a global professionalised tournament business with gigantic amounts of money at stake, formed around participatory cultures rather than formal systems of governance (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski 2012). The 2010s were influenced by the shift from LAN to global streaming forms. The shift enabled game publishers and media platforms to consolidate control over competitive scenes prompting concerns regarding the erosion of grassroots access (Steinkuehler 2020). According to Taylor (2018), this development is in risk of constraining the institutionalisation of amateur esports governance systems. Yet efforts to institutionalise non-professional esports within civil society organisations promise an alternative trajectory (Witkowski 2023).

This article examines that promise by analysing how the Danish Gymnastics- and Sports Associations (DGI) constitutes a meaningful alternative to the dominant market and performance-driven logics of global esports. DGI represents a Danish sport system that has relatively stable institutional arrangements. It is associated with organisational autonomy and a strong associational culture and membership-based democracy that are often invoked as sources of external legitimacy (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2001). In this context, new sport activities generally need to be institutionalised through the associational structure to be recognised as legitimate components of the field.

Research into the institutionalisation of amateur esports in sport federations is limited but few qualitative studies give insights into other esports strategies than the commercial esports governance. Hallman and Giel (2017) point out that there may be economic advantages in the organised non-professional esports, as some sport organisations receive state funding. Countries such as Austria, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium grant VAT exemptions to sports activities serving public interest. Witkowski (2023) suggests that this form of publicly funded esports governance demonstrates considerable salience in terms of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Its associational composition prioritises individuals directly affected by esports – parents, children and young people, and educators – marking a clear distinction from other more professional oriented esports associations. In line with these reflections, Kelly et al. (2022) have developed a framework of governance that focuses on the many young consumers and the harms they are exposed to when

they do esports. The model highlights accountability, responsibility, transparency, social responsibility, independence, fairness, and discipline. When putting amateur esports into a highly normative framework, the sport can offer a useful framework for “gaming with a heart” and address issues related to esports in general e.g., players’ health, gambling issues, and toxic behaviour (Ekdahl et al., 2026).

Against this backdrop, we will explore the institutionalisation of amateur esports as a contested process of translation between institutional orders, and the tensions that arise in the encounter between associational values and a digital sport activity formed by market and performance-driven rationalities, and the governance arrangements that result. The article is structured as follows: First, we present DGI and the Danish sport system. Then, we introduce the key theoretical concepts that guide the analysis – institution, institutionalisation, institutional isomorphism and institutional logics. Thereafter, the methodology behind the case study is addressed. Following this, in the analysis, we identify four phases of the institutionalisation of esports in DGI: the formation years, the preparation phase, the adjustment phase, and the state legitimation phase. We conclude that esports is highly integrated in and institutionalised at all levels in DGI. This is likely due to DGI already having a clear culture and health profile to draw on when new sport activities, like esports, are enrolled in the association. Yet our case will illustrate inherent limits of isomorphic adaptation, especially because of the deep-rooted differences between the market and performance-driven esports industry and associational traditions.

DGI and the Danish sport system

The Danish sport system is shaped by a distinctive organisational pluralism and thereby differs from other European sport systems, both politically and organisationally (Ibsen, 2017). Besides DGI, there are two other sport federations in Denmark, the National Olympic Committee and Sport Federation of Denmark (DIF) and the Danish Federation of Company Sport (DFIF). The three federations receive substantial public funding through the redistribution of gambling revenues under the Act on Distribution of Profits from Lotteries Betting (*Tips- og lottolovgivningen*). Local sports associations affiliated with one of the three sport federations are embedded in a governance framework shaped by the Act on the Allo-

cation of Financial Support to Non-formal Adult Education and Youth Activities (*Folkeoplysningsloven*). The Act institutionalises municipal support for voluntary associations and thereby reinforces the role of membership-based organisations within Danish civil society. Within this governance framework, sport is not merely a competitive or performance-oriented leisure time activity but a vehicle for community formation, associational education, and participatory democracy (Elmose-Østerlund and Ibsen, 2020).

We have selected DGI as our primary case for both analytical and theoretical reasons. DFIF doesn't constitute a theoretically suitable case for this study. Although organised within Danish civil society, company sport is structurally oriented towards workplace-based participation and corporate welfare rather than democratically constituted voluntary associations. DFIF organises esports tournaments and esports events for workplaces, but the federation does not embody the same associational foundation that we seek to investigate. The other umbrella federation, DIF, represents the historical dominant, competition-oriented, and both amateur and elite-sport governing structure within Danish sport. DIF has engaged with esports by incorporating selected esports disciplines into existing member federation, e.g. e-cycling within the Danish Cycling Federation. This strategy effectively domesticates esports within established organisational structures, aligning digital competition with pre-existing sport logics rather than recognising it as a distinct institutional field.

Notably, Danish esports has, since 2007, also been organised through an independent association, ESport Denmark (ESD) which operates outside the traditional Danish sport system. ESD has played a central role in the development of Danish esports; however, the organisation has struggled with financial instability since its establishment. In contrast to the three publicly funded sport federations, ESD's activities rely primarily on allocations from the national Finance Bill in combination with private funding. ESD represents a voluntary membership organisation, but the organisation's institutional position has proven challenges. As noted by Witkowski (2023), ESD has faced persistent difficulties related to stakeholder fragmentation. Moreover, the limited presence of women among its stakeholders has contributed to the continued exclusion of women from the decision-making positions. ESD has applied for admission to DIF, albeit without success. Despite several preliminary discussions, DIF has remained reluctant to grant membership. One explanation may

lie in DIF's organisational logics, governance model and the distribution of resources within the federation system. The rejection appears to reflect more than purely technical assessment of eligibility. Rather than being solely a matter of competition for resources among other existing federations, it can also be part of a broader struggle over what counts as 'sport' (Brandt and Storm 2008). In this respect, esports represents a challenge to established sport structures and institutional boundaries (Abanazir, 2019).

Given that we seek to examine whether civil society sport associations can constitute an alternative to the commercially driven and performance-oriented esports governance, DGI provides a more theoretically generative case where membership democracy and non-elite participation are institutionally sedimented as core principles rather than secondary objectives. DGI is thus rooted in civil society and structured around voluntary engagement, decentralised governance and membership ownership (Elmose-Østerlund and Ibsen, 2020), also conceptualised as "associationalism", where as many sports activities as possible shall be devolved from self-governing voluntary associations (Kaspersen and Ottesen, 2001). It creates spaces for many different individual values based on common entitlements. Selecting DGI enables us to foreground a more value-based and normative way of institutionalising esports (Ekdahl et al., 2026). This would suggest that alternative institutional pathways remain viable. In this sense, DGI functions as a strategically chosen case assessing the transformation or constraining capacity of civil society in the governance of esports.

Because of DGI's roots in associationalism, new sports activities will generally develop from a bottom-up process starting in a local association that applies for membership in one of the fourteen regional sport associations in DGI (Larsen, 2020). A membership gives access to support for, for example, the development of coach education programs within the specific activity. If DGI's national leadership and the political elected national board can see a potential in the new sport, a possible integration and development of the activity will thereafter be shaped predominantly by a markedly top-down process (Bergsgard & Nordberg, 2010; Thing & Ottesen, 2010). We have, therefore, found reasons not only to investigate the institutionalisation of esports at the national level but to pay attention to the early attempts on institutionalisation even before DGI at the national level showed interest in esports.

Institutions, institutionalisation, institutional isomorphisms, and institutional logics

According to Berger and Luckmann (1989), institutions emerge through repeated social interactions that, over time, acquire a taken-for-granted status. Through these interactions, individuals form shared meanings, norms, and routines that structure social life. Institutions are not fixed entities but ongoing processes of habituated practices that are reproduced through repetition. Although these practices may evolve, they retain recognisable patterns that sustain continuity. In this perspective, institutionalisation is a dynamic and human-made process through which social order is created and maintained. Institutions adapt to changing internal and external conditions, yet they also exhibit inertia, meaning that established structures resist rapid change. Over time, when surrounding circumstances shift significantly, institutional transformation may become necessary. Applied to the case of DGI, the framework can illustrate how the organisation's engagement with esports is part of a broader process of institutionalisation. Esports is given meaning, both materially and symbolically through DGI's established practices and values (Larsen, 2020).

This process of meaning-making also connects to broader institutional isomorphic dynamics. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) offer a related perspective to institutions but focus on organisational fields and the mechanisms that make organisations more similar in structure and practice, not just through routine but through external pressure. This adaptation, Powell and DiMaggio argue, is not only for practical reasons, but also to gain legitimacy. Institutional isomorphism is thus useful for analysing institutional processes and decisions that are driven by power relations, especially in situations where actors or organisations are part of these homogenisation processes.

In the context of institutional isomorphism, Powell and DiMaggio (1991) have identified three mechanisms of isomorphic pressures: coercive isomorphism (i), mimetic isomorphism (ii), and normative isomorphism (iii). Coercive isomorphism (i) is defined as an organisational adaptation forced by, for instance, political governance structures, occurring through imposition of norms or rules that the organisation must live up to qualify for financial support. It is typically a result of a cultural pressure in a relatively

clear hierarchical relationship. Mimetic isomorphism (ii), in contrast, is motivated by imitative ambitions between organisations, especially if one organisation appears successful and legitimate, resulting in another organisation striving to imitate what it considers to be successful. Lastly, institutions are at risk of encounter normative isomorphism (iii), a kind of adaption driven by professional affiliation, for instance, if the members of the organisation are formed by certain types of strong professional skills. The pressure emerges out of shared ideas within an organisation, especially about what are, organisationally speaking, appropriate patterns of thought and action.

The three institutional isomorphisms can complement the micro-level processes described by Berger and Luckmann (1989). In the case of DGI, it serves to illustrate how esports in DGI are shaped not only by internal strategies but largely by external demands of legitimacy, illustrated by the state legitimate phase. The point is that DGI operates in an interplay between being a civil society representative, a state partner in welfare policy related to culture, public health and social inclusion, and as a semi-professional actor with market operations through its function as a course provider and the consultancy services it offers to associations (Elmose-Østerlund & Ibsen, 2020; Frandsen, 2020; Larsen, 2022; Støckel et al., 2010; Thing and Ottesen, 2010). DGI's engagement with esports can thus be viewed as both an act of institutionalisation and a response to isomorphic forces within the field of sport, civil society, the state, and EU.

Further, institutions can also be linked to certain logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Institutional logics emerge from patterns that are socially and historically constructed over time – more precisely, from how cultural frameworks of meaning and practise embody a set of values and assumptions through which actors coordinate and organise their interactions (Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics thus describe the fundamental norms and rules that shape how actors in a particular institution or context think, act, and make decisions in a specific social order. In addition, there are different institutional logics that affect DGI's institutional affordances in relation to esports. The associational logics include – for instance – DGI's own logic of sports approaches, a market logic, an educational logic, a democratic logic, a community logic, a voluntarism logic, and a state logic (Larsen, 2020). As we shall show, these often-divergent logics do not always mesh neatly from an associational perspective.

The three theoretical concepts are both used as coding categories and as analytical lenses guiding explanation. Berger and Luckmann (1989) provide

a processual understanding of institutionalisation, Powell and DiMaggio (1991) specify the organisational mechanisms through which stabilisation occurs, and Friedland and Alford (1991) illuminate the competing normative rationalities shaping these processes. Together, they enable the analysis of how esports becomes institutionalised in DGI, through which mechanisms, and under which dominant or contested logics.

Methodology

The study is designed as a theory-driven, qualitative case study (Thualagant, 2016). The theoretical framework guides the empirical patterns and interprets in terms of degrees of stabilisation (institutionalisation), mechanisms of organisational alignment (isomorphism), and the dominance or contestation of institutional logics. The case-study draws on practical and context-dependent empirical knowledge from documents and semi-structured interviews with central actors.

The documents relating to the institutionalisation of esports in DGI cover a period from 2017 to 2025. The identification and collection of relevant documents has partly been carried out through the identification of three mother documents: The National Board Meeting Minutes dated the 17th of March 2017 (DGI, 2017), the instruction booklet from 2018 (Fritzen et al., 2018), and the VAT exemption case from Danish Tax Agency (Skattestyrelsen [DTA], 2020). In all, 28 documents of relevance to the case study were identified. They can be categorised into four types of documents (table 1).

Table 1. *Type of documents*

Category	Type of documents	Number of documents
1	Articles/news	14
2	Instruction booklet	1
3	Law material etc.	1
4	Board Meeting Minutes	7 plus 5 annexes

A key part of identifying relevant documents is to assess the authenticity (i) of said documents, including their credibility (ii), representativeness (iii), and meanings (iiii) (Scott, 1990:6). ‘Authenticity’ (i) pertains to what extent a document can be considered genuine and derives from a reliable

and verifiable source. For example, we rely on a document from the Tax authorities. It is not the original document as it is not publicly available. Nevertheless, we still attach great authenticity to the document because it comes from an authority in Denmark that we trust. Creditability (ii) refers to whether the document presents information that is accurate, unbiased and free from distortion or error. Since many of the documents have been provided by DGI itself and from a local chair of the first esports association in Denmark, the documents must be considered in the light of DGI or the chair's potential interest in framing or legitimating narratives, policies, or outcomes. While this does not invalidate the material, it necessitates a critical awareness of possible biases, selective inclusion of information, or institutional self-representation. Representativeness (iii) refers to considerations of the extent with which a document accurately reflects the broader context or category it is assumed to represent, and if not, whether the degree of its deviation is identifiable. In the case of DGI and the documents from the local chair, it could be argued that our documents are incomplete. But the choice of documents used for the analysis has been a matter of necessity. The purpose has been to identify potential context-specific patterns that may apply the institutionalisation of esports in DGI, not for generalisation. The last reflection to consider is the meaning (iv) of the documents. This relates to the clearness of the content, its internal coherence and its interpretability within its intended context. For instance, analysing meaning could involve attention to how DGI legitimises esports in relation to its values.

By interviewing central actors related to the institutionalisation of esports as part of the case study, we want to underline the importance of understanding institutions as a human-made and dynamic process that occurs when different actors mutually typify habitual actions (Berger & Luckmann, 1989). The interviews therefore serve as central extensions of the documents. All participants have been selected because they have played a significant role in the establishment and development of esports in DGI, either as practitioners, consultants, directors, or as decision-makers (see table 2). The only one who deviates from this is the media researcher who participates in the study; she is included due to her in-depth knowledge of the Danish media and sport institutions, having published research about the institutionalisation of esports as an example of sport as media.

Table 2. *Interviews with key stakeholders*

Interview	Participants	Gender	Duration of interview
1	Two current esports consultants in DGI	Males	2:10
2	Previous esports consultant in DGI	Male	1:49
3	Previous esports special consultant in DGI	Male	1:35
4	Previous project leader of esports in DGI	Male	0:53
5	Current member of the National Board in DGI	Male	1:08
6	Previous chief director in DGI	Female	0:54
7	Current chair of a local esports' association in DGI	Male	1:18
8	Chief legal adviser in DGI	Male	0:47
9	Media researcher	Female	1:12

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between the 10th of March 2025 and the 26th of May 2025 by the first author. The semi-structured interview guide was divided into three themes by the first author as well. The first theme focused on the interviewee's role in DGI and the practices that come with this role. Theme two was about the three forms of institutional isomorphism and the possible legitimation issues that the interviewee(s) experienced in this context. Theme three focused on the interviewee(s)' perspectives on the options and challenges for esports in DGI. Six out of nine interviews were conducted online. Interview 1 was carried out at DGI's national office. Interviews 3 and 5 were conducted in the offices at the interviewees' current workplace. All interviews were transcribed by the AI-driven tool offered by the meeting app Teams. Subsequently, the taped interviews were listened through and proofed by the first author.

As this study is pragmatically oriented, both open and theoretically informed, data analysis followed a mixture of what Lynggaard (2025) describes as a hypothetico-deductive and an analytical inductive strategy. That is to say, the coding process began with an open coding where the analysis was guided by the same two questions, namely "What is going on in the text?" and "What does the text say?" (see table 3). Thereafter, the codes were identified based on the study's theoretical framework as part of a more deductive process. In the analysis, quotations illustrate the analytical themes identified through the coding process, rather than being representative. The analysis was also mainly carried out by the first author.

Table 3. *Examples from the coding process*

	Text	What is going on?	What does the document or the interviewees say?	Theory informed codes
National Board Meeting Minutes January 30, 2017	"DGI has two basic tools to work with: Sports activity and sports communities. In relation to eSports, it is primarily the development of sports communities that justifies DGI's work in the area. It is the board's position that DGI should work with eSports to promote the idea of association, volunteerism and open democratic communities in electronic sports".	The board members have decision-making authority and must therefore finally approve the proposal from the management director and the working group that has been appointed to prepare an effort on the esports field.	They argue that esports as a sport activity in DGI is mainly suitable to be developed in relation to communities	Institutional legitimation
Interview 6	"... the associational life does something for our children and young people"	The leader argues that the associational life matters to children	In this way, the leader supports the narrative of associational life as something more than just going to sports	An example of associational logic

What follows below is the result of the analysis of the institutionalisation of esports in the context of DGI. The three identified 'mother' documents provide the contours of three of the four identified institutionalisation phases in this regard. These three phases are "the preparation phase", "the adjustment phase", and "the state legitimation phase". The interviews unearthed another initial phase, "the formative years". Each phase is characterised by important milestones in the process of adapting esports to DGI's values as a sport organisation in the Danish sport system.

The formative years – from informal modes of organisation to the first initiatives to institutionalise esports in DGI

The early years of esports in Denmark can be understood through the institutional process described by Berger and Luckmann (1989). It starts informally as self-organised sports. While the analysis takes Roskilde eSport as its empirical point of departure, there are indications that similar early processes of institutionalisation were unfolding in other parts of Denmark (Kromann, 2008; Taylor, 2012).

Towards the end of the 20th century a group of young men is congregating around their enthusiasm for gaming as a nexus. The young men form a physical community by bringing their computers with them to the local community centre, where they play together a couple of times a week. Through these repeated interactions, shared meanings, routines, and expectations, governance gradually stabilises, giving esports a taken-for-granted social form prior to its formal institutionalisation. The process is driven by passionate individuals whose deep personal commitment to the activity and community motivates collective self-organisation and cultural continuity rather than formal institutional power or commercial incentives:

That was the thing with the computer. It created a sense of community. We played at the local internet cafe. I was the coach. We organised ourselves into teams, came to the cafe twice a week, trained as a team, trained the different roles in the game, just like any other sport. Around the turn of the millennium, we also started playing matches against other teams (interview 7).

In the case of Roskilde eSport, the group appears to have recognised that such informal practises provided limited organisational legitimacy. In 2006, they establish Denmark's first esports association, Roskilde eSport. While partly prompted by the closure of the local internet café that had previously hosted their activities, this move reflects the Danish sport context, in which associations constitute a widely recognised and legitimate organisational form:

There were about 50-60 of us who met at the internet cafe. Suddenly we have nowhere to go! ... What should we do now? Several of us had played football. We grew up with the associational culture. So, it was natural

for us to think ... we should have our own esports club, anchored in the associational culture. In that way, esports can also get a more popular foundation ... (interview 7).

Subsequently, this development shows how esports became integrated into an established sport organisation. As a start, the chairman and the DGI consultant have several informal meetings: “He meets me with an open mind, and he is very interested in our local association” (interview 7). Building on these first informal meetings, Roskilde eSport applies for membership in one of DGI’s fourteen regional associations in 2007. To design a culture of association, Roskilde eSport adapts its values to those of DGI. For example, the association describes their esports values as part of being “... healthy, social and having fun” (Roskilde eSport, 2010). Candy, chips and cola are banned (Kromann, 2008). The lack of physical activity in their esports practice, a disqualifying element vis-à-vis DGI membership, is circumvented by going for a run before training; not exactly an initiative that increases the number of members, most of whom are mainly interested in playing esports. The local esports association in this way imitates DGI’s values, specifically as they relate to health and exercise, but these are not necessarily values appreciated among the broader clientele of esports players. That is to say, the local esports initiative, as a new but largely unregulated sports-like activity, adopts a form of mimetic isomorphism to signify success and legitimacy. By imitating DGI’s practice, structure and associational language, esports appears more acceptable as a sport activity.

As part of the ongoing networking between Roskilde eSport and the consultant of the regional subdivision of DGI, an instructor training program is developed in 2012 (DGI, 2012). The idea is to offer a coach certificate to the local esports’ associations, to schools and institutions that are interested in esports communication, esports didactic, team building, physicality, diet, and ethicality. The program is further refined over time, illustrating that the cooperation between the local association and the regional esports consultant is manifested in relation to education programmes and instructional guidelines (interview 7). In 2015, DGI has facilitated the training of 20 esports instructors (Vestergaard, 2015).

Despite the openness from the regional association in DGI to adapt esports to the associational culture and local governance structure, the formative years also show that these first attempts to institutionalise esports are burdened with other institutional challenges than usual when a new sports activity is made ready for becoming part of the associational culture. There are more expensive costs involved in acquiring all the

equipment required to practice esports. “Many associations encountered bumps despite their great work” (interview 7).

The formative years thus illustrate how early esports communities lack recognised governance structures within the Danish sport field. Through mimetic and normative mechanisms – including the adoption of associational values, governance practises, and instructor training – local actors translate esports into a familiar organisational template, resulting in the first stable routines and partial legitimacy within DGI.

The preparation phase – framing esports as an associational sports activity

Based on insights from the formative years, the data points to an increasing demand from DGI’s local and regional associations as representative of civil society to prioritise resources for esports. As it is noted, the work is “... already taking place in six to seven of DGI’s fourteen regional associations” (DGI, 2017). Some regions even stand out by having “strong” professional resources encouraged to be deployed in the special effort to integrate esports in DGI. By 2017, DGI has registered 2,105 esports members across 68 associations. Based on these initial figures, projections suggested that esports participation within DGI could more than quadruple by 2020, reaching approximately 16,840 members (DGI, 2017).

Of particular importance is that there are critical voices to esports: “You know, a lot of us had this image of young people. It was about getting those young people, figuratively speaking, out of the basement, taking the hood off their hoodies, and getting them out and meeting some real people” (interview 6). On the one hand, esports is influenced by a “bedroom culture” practised individually at private homes (Brus, 2020; DGI, 2021). It must therefore be cultivated to become an associational sports activity. On the other hand, a translation of esports into an associational model has potential because “... the associative life does something for our children and young people” (interview 6).

As part of the rising expectations, DGI’s National Board starts the preparation phase by asking DGI’s director of sports and physical activities to arrange a presentation for the next board meeting, specifically on how DGI can support the development of esports into DGI’s traditional associational model. Shortly after, a working group is established for the preparatory work. The working group consists of three representatives

from different decision-making levels in DGI, a chief secretary also from DGI and the chairman of Roskilde eSport. To gain recognition of the new practise, the working group recommends that DGI prioritises efforts in four areas: “Associational development, education, tournament activities, and schools, preferably in collaboration with ESD. “... There is a great match between the values in the two organisations”, as it is stated (DGI, 2017). DGI also emphasises the in-person, “physical sports community” as a key element of DGI’s associational model, as it is said in the minutes (DGI, 2017). These face-to-face communities are seen as strengthening children’s social live, their ability to cooperate, and ultimately their self-esteem.

In this phase, DGI works with organisational fit and cultural legitimacy, as esports is widely perceived as a professional sport and as an individualised ‘bedroom culture’ that conflicts with DGI’s associational sport model. Through moral framing, organisational standardisation, and alliance-building, DGI reframes esports as a pedagogical and community-based activity, leading to the development of national priorities and governance structures for associational esports.

The adjustment phase – meeting the risks of esports

At the National Board meeting in 2017, DGI decides to make esports a strategic priority. During the meeting, the National Board further elaborates on how DGI would work to legitimise esports aligning it with the values and organisational principles of their associational model. The inclusion of esports necessitates a focus on the development of democratic communities, an associational mindset and volunteerism in esports (DGI, 2017). Soon after, a project leader and two esports-consultants are hired to manage this process. During 2017 and 2018, two important milestones are reached. The first milestone constitutes a range of agreements with other national esports actors, the second is the instruction booklet “Get success with esports”.

An example of the first milestone is the cooperation agreement that DGI enters with ESD, the Youth Ring (an interest organisation for Danish leisure and youth clubs and secondary schools), Danish Workplace Sports (DFIF), Centre for Gambling Addiction, and Anti-Doping Denmark regarding the Ethical Code of Esports (ECE). ECE has, among other things, a focus on

fair play, health, and esports without alcohol, energy drinks, drugs, and gambling. DGI's adoption of ECE can be interpreted as an expression of responsibility and alignment with established sporting and societal values in a welfare state (Frandsen, 2020). The point is that the ECE not only reflects internal aspirations but also seeks to enhance DGI's legitimacy in relation to – for instance – policy makers, sponsors, and the wider public.

Another example of an agreement is the cooperation that DGI enters with the association behind the official National Esports Liga (NEL). As part of the agreement, DGI requires that the values behind NEL as a non-profit association must be explicit. “The aim is to positively influence esports with a focus on healthy gaming culture and user involvement through local roots, to ensure stability and orderly conditions so that esports can develop better in Denmark, and to work for better conditions for esports, including combating match-fixing and doping” (DGI, 2018). In other words, DGI once again operates under an associational logic that emphasises voluntarism, health, and moral responsibility as referred to in the preparation phase. The point is that this form of logic legitimises esports as an activity that contributes to the common good. When DGI continuously insists on making these associational values explicit, it should be seen in the light of a coercive pressure from the state and the municipalities. A part of being a public funded organisation, DGI is – for instance – expected to be transparent and to promote strong welfare values.

A less successful cooperation is the attempt to align with the gaming industry. DGI excludes the possibilities of making agreements with esports as a spectator sports and professional esports stakeholders. In this elitist context, esports is founded in a “digital, commercial and professional” landscape, as it is noted (DGI, 2018). This statement underlines the advantages of marking DGI as an amateur sports organisation that is eligible for state- and municipality recognition. But DGI's non-negotiability line goes both ways. The gaming industry is not interested in a cooperation agreement either: “... We have had only limited success in engaging in dialogue with the game providers. This may be because their business model deals with the end user and not the organised segment that clubs, associations, schools, represent etc.” (interview 1). The two institutions thus represent two competing logics that clash when they meet each other. More broadly, this suggests that the producers of esports are driven by market and performance logics which do not align with DGI's non-profit and public purpose.

The other milestone in the adjustment phase is the instruction booklet “Get Success with Esports”. The purpose is to guide local associations towards “who they are, and what they stand for” (Fritzen et al., 2018, p. 13). The 95-page booklet is written by the three consultants, hired by DGI to handle the administrative tasks and prioritisations in relation to the integration of esports into the associational model of DGI. The content in the booklet is about everything considered relevant to establishing associational esports. The values stressed in this connection are, for instance, reflections on roles, tasks and responsibilities for the local association’s members, information about the Pan European Game Information’s (PEGI) age rating, education and courses, esports’ activities, health and physical training, possible associational expenses and income and marketing. It is “well-known stuff” as DGI describes it (DGI, 2018). This suggests that the integration of esports into DGI’s associational culture is an act of institutional translation. Over the years, DGI has included many new sports and translated them by using associational logics that emphasise health, collective participation, volunteerism, democratic governance and social development.

In this phase, focus is on moral legitimacy and boundary definition as esports is associated with risks related to commercialisation, unhealthy gaming cultures, and gambling. DGI responds through boundary work, ethical codes and guidelines, while revealing persistent tensions between associational and market- and performance-oriented logics.

The state legitimation phase – from internal organisational translation to external validation

As part of coercive isomorphism, a noteworthy example of DGI’s interaction with formal regulatory frameworks is the VAT exemption case that the organisation brought before the tax authorities in 2019/2020 (DTA, 2020). In contrast to the previous phases identified in the analysis, the VAT case marks a distinct phase of state legitimation. Here, DGI actively seeks formal assessment from the state of whether the organisation’s translation of the sports is sufficient for esports to be recognised as amateur sport within the existing legal framework.

The VAT exemption case concerns the question whether “... esports constitutes a sport covered by the concept of amateur sport ... when practised under the organisation of A and thereby involving a significant element of physical activity” (DTA, 2020). DGI raised the question first before the Danish Tax Agency, and thereafter, because of a ‘no’ to the question asked, to the Tax Council. While the Tax Agency administers tax law, the Tax Council issues binding rulings on specific legal questions.

The first request to the Tax Agency is based on the ideas from the instruction booklet, describing DGI’s concrete practises, with examples of how the organisation has translated esports into an associational sport, emphasising training practises, coaching structures, and the physical aspects of participation. Initially, the Tax Agency rejected the request, stating that “... esports, in itself, does not involve a significant element of physical activity, but primarily entails elements comparable to those found in contract bridge, requiring memory, logic, and strategic reasoning” (DTA, 2020).

Subsequently, DGI raised the question before the Danish Tax Council (*Skatterådet*). According to DGI, bringing the case before the Tax Council was important because it allows for a broader interpretive assessment of the issue (interview 8). In the subsequent binding ruling, the Tax Council adopted a broader interpretation inspired by the Court of Justice of the European Union, emphasising that sports should be assessed not only in terms of the competition event itself but also in relation to the training and preparatory activities that make competition possible (DTA, 2020).

The state legitimation phase thus concerns legal classification and regulatory legitimacy, specifically whether esports can be recognised as amateur esports within the existing legal framework governing Danish sport. Through legal classification strategies, DGI mobilises EU jurisprudence and national tax authorities to validate its translation of esports into associational sport, resulting in a formal recognition that strengthens esports’ institutional compatibility with the Danish sports system.

Conclusion

By drawing on institutional theory, comprising isomorphisms and institutional logics, this study shows that the institutionalisation of esports in DGI has been shaped not only by internal strategies but largely

through isomorphic mechanisms as well. Institutional pressures affect the organisational behaviour, as it were. Taken together, the four phases illustrate how esports is gradually institutionalised within the Danish sport system. Consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1989) understanding of institutionalisation, initially informal gaming practises become stabilised through repeated interactions, organisational routines, and shared meanings. As the activity moves into the organisational field in the Danish sport system, this process is further shaped by mimetic, normative, and coercive pressures that encourage actors to align esports with the established logics of Danish associationalism. Institutionalisation unfolds as a progress of translation in which esports is progressively reframed, standardised, and ultimately validated within existing organisational and legal structures. The process of institutionalisation is illustrated in table 4 overleaf.

DGI has thus translated esports into its established associational framework guided by the organisation's normative values of community, voluntarism, and health. The institutionalisation appears as a complex process of adaptation, negotiation, and legitimation illustrating a selective process in which some practises and meanings are emphasised, others are reinterpreted or excluded. Frandsen (2020) argues that the institutionalisation of esports is a two-way process that will transform both the institution of esports and the institution of sport. However, our case indicates that there is limit of isomorphic adaptation. The gap between the market and performance-driven logics and the traditional associational logics cannot be fully overcome. Rather than being a mutual organisational transformation, esports has been adjusted to DGI's existing logics with no major changes to DGI's core governance architecture, membership model, and the organisation's values is largely intact. Had the process instead been one of transformation, it would have entailed a more fundamental reconfiguration of DGI's institutional logics, organisational structures, and normative understandings of sport. This may partly explain why DGI's expectations for increased membership have not materialised, instead remaining at a low but consistently stable level over the past three years. Although presenting esports as an activity within an association could function as a means of legitimation, it remains perceived as a comparatively less acceptable associational pursuit than traditional sports such as football (Walkerline, 2007).

Table 4. *Overview of the institutionalisation of esports in Denmark*

Phase	Institutional problem	Key mechanisms	Institutional outcome
Formative years	Lack of organisational legitimacy and recognised governance structures for amateur esports	Mimetic and normative isomorphism; adoption of associational values; early instructor training and organisational routines	Emergence of the first associations and partial alignment with Danish associational sports model
Preparation phase	Cultural and organisational misfit between 'bedroom culture' and associational sport	Moral framing of esports as youth development; standardisation; working groups, and alliances	Esports reframed as a pedagogical community-based associational activity
Adjustment phase	Concerns about moral legitimacy and boundary definition (health, gambling, commercialisation)	Ethical codes, governance guidelines, alliances with public actors; boundary work against commercial esports	Institutional governance tools for associational esports and clearer distinction from market- and performance driven esports
State legitimisation phase	Legal classification uncertainty, whether esports qualifies as amateur sport	Legal classification strategies; mobilisation of EU jurisprudence and tax authorities	Formal recognition of esports within the fiscal and regulatory framework of Danish associational sport

In addition, the study confirms one of the 'growing pains' related to esports governance (Witkowski, 2023). Women remain significantly under-represented, particularly in positions of leadership and as primary stakeholders. Rather than disrupting these gendered asymmetries, the recruitment of interviewees shows that DGI appears to participate in structural reproduction. This suggests that the integration of esports into established associational structures not automatically produces greater inclusivity. Instead, gendered institutional logics may be reproduced across organisational levels, as existing governance practises, volunteer cultures, and recruitment patterns subtly reinforce patterns of male dominance.

At the theoretical level, our findings show that institutionalisation is far from neutral. The formation, preparation, and adjustment phases

underline the extent to which DGI is driven by isomorphic pressures in the process of translating esports into associational language and practises. These pressures shape DGI's organisational behaviour and its external engagement on the one hand, while on the other, they provoke tensions between competing logics that are difficult to reconcile. Yet, the tension is also productive, as it stimulates dialogue on what constitutes legitimacy between DGI and other esports stakeholders as demonstrated by the Code of Ethics. Together with the VAT exemption case, it reveals coercive pressures, rooted in DGI's dependence on public funding and responsibilities, ultimately shaping the contours of how esports can be legitimised within the Danish sport system.

While principled debates over esports' sporting status remain relevant for delineating conceptual boundaries (Jenny et al., 2017), much is lost when such debates remain abstract. Specifically, such definitional disputes risk obscuring the lived, institutional, and policy realities that can and do shape esports' development within concrete organisational contexts. Based on analysis of our case of such a concrete development, the present study has shown that the institutionalisation of esports centrally hinges on negotiations of legitimacy, value, and governance. What remains, and what matters, are in these contexts the tensions between associational logics and market and performance-driven logics, between associational ideals and market pressures, and between embodied and digital forms of participation.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors report no competing interests to declare

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